

VZCZCXRO1235
PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHSL
RUEHSR
DE RUEHAH #1590/01 3430935
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 090935Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3873
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5973
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3667
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3526
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4215
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4157

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001590

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/08/2019

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNREGISTERED RELIGIOUS GROUP
LEADERS FRUSTRATED BY LACK OF PROGRESS

Classified By: Acting DCM Peter Eckstrom, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. At a recent Embassy-organized roundtable attended by leaders of unregistered religious groups, the participants were at a loss to describe a path forward. Two groups have had applications pending at the Ministry of Justice for a year, but inquiries about their status are left unanswered. Other small Protestant groups' applications have yet to clear the Council on Religious Affairs' vetting process, which repeatedly returns documents to the groups for corrections. In the case of the Catholic church, it awaits the ordination of a Turkmenistan citizen who could serve as leader of the church, as required by Turkmen law. A leader, whose group has not applied, worried that they would not be able to find a premises for meetings once the group became publicly known. The overall tone of these men of faith was more pessimistic than usual, perhaps indicating a limit even to their patience when faced with the inscrutable obstacles to registration posed by the government. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On December 3, poloff met with representatives of six unregistered religious groups to hear updates on their respective situations and their views about what is needed. Begjan Shirmedov of the Iman Yoly (Path of Faith) Turkmen Baptist Church in Dashoguz said his group is not subject to any pressure and that the authorities "do not touch them." However, regarding the issue of registration, the group has been waiting for one year since its documents were forwarded by the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) to the Ministry of Justice for final approval. Shirmedov has been told that the documents are complete, but the commission that approves registrations has lacked the necessary members to take action. Shirmedov doubted this was actually the case because the same commission is responsible for registering businesses and he felt it was not possible that the commission could delay business registrations for an entire year. He said he has sent letters and called the commission asking for an update. When the staff recognize his number on the caller id, Shirmedov said they refuse to answer the phone. He could offer no explanation for the delay, except to say simply that there is no desire on the part of the government to register his church. The former Mufti of Turkmenistan, Rowshen Allaberdiyev, who was transferred to Dashoguz in September and is the chairman of the provincial CRA, reportedly told

Shirmedov to hurry up and finish the registration process at the national level, adding that there would be no difficulty with local registration. But when Shirmedov explained about the delay at the Ministry of Justice, Allaberdiyev said there was nothing he could do about that. Shirmedov also said he is concerned that any violation of the law by a group member, for example, for possession of unauthorized literature, could be used as an excuse to derail his group's registration, so they are especially careful about their behavior.

13. (C) Like the above-mentioned Iman Yoly church, the Light of Life Evangelical Church in Abadan has been waiting for the past year as its application sits at the Ministry of Justice pending final approval. Pastor Ruslan Atajanov mentioned that his group has been allowed to gather to observe religious holidays and that the group has not suffered any harassment. He said he last checked on the status of his church's registration one month ago and was told by a Ministry of Justice official to wait.

14. (C) Jehovah's Witness leader Andrey Zhbanov pointed out that his group has been trying to register for 17 years. While during that time they have not been able to register, he thought there had nonetheless been a lot of improvement in the way religious groups are treated. Zhbanov expressed appreciation to the international community for observing and reporting about what happens in Turkmenistan, but emphasized that each person must decide for him/herself about how they will respond to government pressure. He noted that, among Jehovah's Witnesses, it is a personal decision whether or not to serve in the military when conscripted. While those who

ASHGABAT 00001590 002 OF 003

choose not to serve are sometimes imprisoned, he felt that international pressure was responsible for the release from prison of 10 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors in the past. He believed that the four conscientious objectors currently in prison would also be released eventually due to international attention. Zhbanov mentioned that, at a meeting with CRA Deputy Chairman Nury Gurbanov, the Deputy Chairman showed him a file full of complaints against the Jehovah's Witnesses and referred to the group as "extremists." But when Zhbanov replied that, if the Jehovah's Witnesses were extremists, the government should press charges in court, Gurbanov backtracked, expressing surprise that a religious group would approve of resorting to legal proceedings. Zhbanov thought this exchange showed that the Deputy Chairman himself recognized that his allegation was baseless.

15. (C) Timur Muradov of the Word of Life church in Turkmenbashi mentioned the foreign travel ban on Ilmyrat Nurlyev of the Turkmen Evangelical Church in Mary. He asserted that the travel restriction was one of a series of violations of the rights of religious minorities. He mentioned the searches that he has undergone when he travels, including the seizure of items such as an empty thumb drive on the suspicion that it contained religious material. Pastor Timur, who is usually upbeat about the registration of his church, was untypically critical of the efforts of international organizations to support religious freedom in Turkmenistan. In his church's case, registration documents were returned for corrections about nine months ago and he plans to resubmit them in January 2010.

16. (C) Ishan Amanmuhammedov of the Path to Heaven evangelical church commented that individuals in Turkmenistan can not do anything to spur the registration of religious groups and asked what international organizations could do. He recalled an occurrence in 2004 when several religious groups were quickly summoned and registered, apparently due to international pressure. He mentioned a previously unknown group in Turkmenabat called the Living Water church that is under strong pressure from the authorities. Amanmuhammedov said the collective farms in the area hold meetings at which officials tell people not to become involved with the Living

Water church; that it would be a betrayal of Islam. He commented that generally, Islamic influence is strengthening as schools organize excursions to holy sites and there is a going desire for "an Islamic country opposed to Christians." Amanmuhamedov's own group has not applied for registration and he worries that, when they do apply, they will have difficulty both locating and paying for a premises to hold their meetings.

17. (C) Father Andrzej Madej of the Catholic Church remarked that his church has existed 13 years under a diplomatic umbrella, and that during that entire time, people have been able to come to his church and pray without obstacles. However, the obstacle to registration is the legal requirement to have a Turkmen citizen as the head of the church. Father Andrzej, a Polish citizen, offered to become a Turkmen citizen, but was refused. A Catholic Turkmen citizen is currently receiving religious training in Ukraine. In four years, when the training is completed, Father Andrzej hopes that the Catholic Church will be registered in Turkmenistan. He noted that the CRA had told him that the nationality issue was the only outstanding issue in its registration process.

18. (C) During the discussion, Shirmedov suggested that perhaps the two pending applications at the Ministry of Justice are not approved in order to discourage and/or delay other applications for registration. Atajanov wondered if there was some way that church groups could help the government to get to know them better in order to improve their image. Muradov asked why the Russian Orthodox Church is allowed, but not Protestant groups. Shirmedov commented

ASHGABAT 00001590 003 OF 003

on discrimination against Christians, saying that they are not hired at state enterprises. His grandson was dismissed from the Turkmen-Turkish high school in Dashoguz when he said he was not a Muslim and his family was unwilling to pay a bribe for him to remain.

19. (C) COMMENT: One year ago, Shirmedov and Atajanov were optimistic that their churches would soon be registered, since their applications had been cleared by the CRA, an apparent sign of progress. The ensuing delay at the Ministry of Justice, with no explanation of the reason, resembles the situation of local NGOs trying to register; regardless of the steps they take to revise their applications, the documents are repeatedly returned to them by the Ministry for additional "corrections." Without further insight into the internal policies of the government, it's difficult to offer an explanation for the churches' registration difficulties beyond what Shirmedov suggested, that the authorities "just don't want to register them." END COMMENT.
CURRAN